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ABSTRACT

A content analysis was performed on 3,134 questions from 62 examinations given in the mass communications and society courses in colleges throughout the United States. The questions were analyzed and categorized on the basis of three general groups: geographical reference, media reference, and topic reference. The findings revealed the following: questions on examinations do not seem to reflect any tendency to emphasize a geographical area; with respect to mentioning a specific medium, the majority of questions fell into the subcategories of no media mentioned, newspapers, television, and "broadcast media"; the class of "broadcast media" was emphasized more than the class of "print media" in examination questions; the relative rank of media specifically mentioned in the questions was the same as the rank of media specifically mentioned on course syllabi; with respect to mentioning a specific topic, the majority of examination questions fell into the subcategories of other topics, history of the press, communication models, press law, advertising, and press operations; the topics instructors put on course syllabi and rated as priority topics were not necessarily the same topics emphasized on examinations; and instructors seemed to feel more comfortable with the more traditional topics as course content and on examinations. (FL)

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MASS MEDIA AND SOCIETY:

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE 'WINDOW-TO-THE-FIELD' COURSE EXAMS

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Introduction

In 1976 the Teaching Committee of the Mass Communication and Society Division of AEJ began a three year research project designed to examine the introductory survey of mass communications course. The intent of this project was to study the content of this important course to determine what elements of content were most common, and what media and topics were covered.¹ A three-pronged approach was used to analyze the content of the course. First, the content of course syllabi was analyzed. Second, instructor's ratings of possible course objectives which contained content that could possibly be included in the course were analyzed. The final phase, which is the subject of this study, analyzed the content of exams given in the course.

This study is the final report arising from the introductory course project. The purpose of this study was to analyze the content of exams given in the introductory survey of mass communications course. From the analysis of exam content, we (the committee) could determine what media and topics instructors are including in their exam questions. Given this information, we could reasonably infer what media and topics are being taught, and perhaps emphasized, in the introductory survey of mass communications course. We would then have a third indication of what media and topics are being covered in the course.

1. Donald L. Shaw and Richard R. Cole, 'Mass Media and Society: A Survey of the 'Window-To-The-Field' Course,' paper presented at AEJ Convention, August, 1976.

Previous Studies

Since this study is built on and related to the two previous studies in the project, it is important to consider the findings of these studies before reporting the findings of the present study.

The initial study in 1976, under the direction of Donald L. Shaw and Richard R. Cole, was a content analysis of the syllabi of mass communication and society courses.² The study was limited by the fact that syllabi do not represent actual course content. However, the findings of the study do give some general indications of topical areas being covered in the introductory course. In general, the findings show: (1) beginning courses cover specific media and topics; (2) topics such as press-government relations are stressed more than topics such as communications models; (3) the history and future of the press are covered, and (4) other topics stressed are audiences, media economics, criticism, ethics and press philosophies.³

The second and most recent study, under the direction of Gerald Stone, was an analysis of instructor's ratings of course objectives which contained content likely to be covered in the introductory course.⁴ These ratings were then compared to the ratings of objectives by a panel

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Gerald Stone, "Course Objectives in the 'Window-To-The-Field' Class: A Survey of Mass Communications and Society Instructors," Teaching Committee of the Mass Communication and Society Division of AEJ and California State University, Long Beach, 1977.

of media experts reported in a similar study by Janice C. Rawson.⁵

The survey and the comparison of instructor's ratings and media experts' ratings produced many interesting findings, some of which are important to the present study.

With respect to rating the priority of course content, the study shows that . . .

teachers give high ratings to: First Amendment guarantees, an informed public, basics about mass media and their characteristics, media economics, the mass consumer, and mass communication theory topics, in about that priority order. Low ratings were given to issues concerning: political campaigns, access to media by pressure groups and reportorial bias.⁶

When contrasting the differences between experts and instructors on the basis of content priorities, the study shows that . . .

teachers give higher rankings to: advertising topics, mass communication theory and economics. The experts give higher rankings to: media regulations, relations with government, public knowledge and freedom of the press, and evaluation and criticism of content of published reports.

There is evidence that the panel of experts' rankings stresses what a future media professional should know while teachers opt for subject matter a media consumer should know.

It should be noted that the topic of history of the press is not mentioned in the findings of the second study. The reason for this is

5. Janice C. Rawson, "Objectives of Instruction about Mass Communications Suitable for the Average Media Consumer at the Post-High School Level," masters thesis, 1973.

6. Stone, op. Cit., p. 10.

7. Stone, op. cit., p. 16.

that objectives containing content about the history of the press were not included in the list of objectives sent to the instructors. This topic was excluded so that the list of objectives would be identical with the list of objectives used in the Rawson study. This exclusion was recognized by the committee as a major weakness of the study. It is noted here since history of the press shows up as a salient topic area in the findings of the initial study (1976) and in the findings of the present study.

In general, the findings of the two previous studies show consistencies with respect to content covered in the introductory survey of mass communications course. These findings are generally consistent with the findings of the present study.

Methology

A content analysis was performed on the questions from 62 exams given in the mass communications and society course. The original sample size was 88. Twenty six exams were eliminated from the final sample because of two considerations. First, some exams contained a majority of questions whose subject matter was difficult to fit to any of the content categories. These questions could have been categorized as "Insufficient Information to Categorize". But it was decided not to categorize the questions this way because of the potential biasing effect this would have on the overall results. Second, the coders of questions on a number of exams could not reach agreement on the appropriate categorization of the content, even after several attempts. Therefore, these exams were eliminated from the sample.

Coding of the exam questions was done by various members of the Teaching Committee. Intercoder reliability was achieved by having the various members of the committee code the same exam questions. The coding sheets were then checked for discrepancies in the coding of the questions. This method produced an acceptable level of intercoder reliability.

The structure and format of the exams ranged from objective true/false, multiple choice question exams to subjective long answer essay question exams. To gain some understanding of the level and type of exams being analyzed, we tried to group the exams on the basis of course level and whether or not the exam was a final exam. With respect to course level, we found the following: (1) 35 of the exams were from a beginning course;

(2) 1 exam was from an intermediate course, and (3) 26 exams contained insufficient information to permit assigning to a group. With respect to type of exam, we found the following: (1) 22 exams were final exams; (2) 28 exams were not final exams, and (3) 12 exams contained insufficient information to permit determination of exam type.

A total of 3134 questions were analyzed and categorized on the basis of three general categories. The categories were geographical reference, media reference and topic reference. The categories of media reference and topic reference are the same categories selected for use by Shaw and Cole in the 1976 study.⁸ These categories are self-explanatory. The category of geographical reference was added to the analysis to see if questions on exams were showing any tendency to emphasize local, regional, national or international media, issues or topics. The assumption underlying the use of this category was that content in some courses might stress media and media topics more in connection with local media or national media, etc. If this were true, then the exam questions could reflect the geographical slant of the course content.

The sub-categories used to categorize the content of the questions falling into one of the general categories are shown in Table 1. In order to facilitate comparison of results and findings across all three studies, we used the same sub-categories in the media reference category and the topic reference category that Shaw and Cole used in their study.⁹ We did, however, add some sub-categories to each of these general categories. In the media reference category, the sub-categories of "Cable Systems",

8. Shaw and Cole, op. cit.

9. Shaw and Cole, op. cit.

"Other Media Mentioned", "No Media Mentioned", and "Insufficient Information to Categorize" were added to facilitate handling questions that clearly did not fit into the established media categories. In the topic reference category, the sub-categories of "Other Topics" and "Insufficient Information to Categorize" were added for the same reason.

It should be noted that the diversity of general course objectives, exam questions and exam structure and format make it exceedingly difficult to design a satisfactory content analysis. Thus, the findings of this study are only general comparisons among exams and courses.

TABLE I

General Content Categories and Sub-Categories

Geographical Reference

City or Metro
 State
 U.S. Regions
 U.S.
 Foreign Nations
 Global Perspective
 Insufficient Information
 to Categorize

Media Reference

Person Connected with Media
 Newspapers
 Magazines
 Books
 "Printed Media"
 Television
 Radio
 Cable Systems
 "Broadcast Media"
 Film
 Recordings
 Other Media Mentioned
 No Media Mentioned
 Insufficient Information
 to Categorize

Topic Reference

Press-Government Relations
 Audience Analysis
 Advertising
 4-Theories of Press
 Press Criticism
 Press Ethics
 Press Law
 Economics of Press
 Future of Press
 History of Press
 Press "in general"
 Press & Popular Culture
 Press as Gatekeeper
 Role of Feedback
 Press & Pressure Groups
 Entertainment Role
 International Communication
 Press Councils
 Education in Journalism
 Persuasion
 Communications Models
 Wire Services
 Press Operations
 Words-Symbols
 Other Topics
 Insufficient Information
 to Categorize

Findings

Geographical Reference

As the data in Table 2 shows, questions on exams given in the mass communication and society course do not seem to reflect any significant tendency to emphasize a geographical area. Of the 3134 questions analyzed, 2450 or 81% contained insufficient information to categorize on the basis of local, regional, national or international media or media topics. There is, perhaps, some slight tendency to slant content toward the national (U.S.) level since 13.7% of the questions could be categorized as emphasizing national media or media topics. But in general, the data seem to suggest that exam questions, and perhaps course content, are not concerned with geographical emphasis.

TABLE 2

Analysis of Question Content by Reference to Geographical Area

<u>Sub-Category</u>	<u>No. of Questions</u>	<u>% of Total*</u>
City or Metro	86	2.7%
State	10	.3
U.S. Regional	17	.5
U.S. National	428	13.7
Foreign Nation	36	1.1
Global Perspective	17	.5
Insufficient Information to Categorize	2540	81.0

* Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.

Media Reference

Analysis of exam questions suggests that with respect to mentioning a specific medium the majority of questions fall into four sub-categories: no media mentioned, newspapers, television, and "broadcast media", in that order. As the data in Table 3 shows, slightly over one third of the questions mention no specific medium. These questions tend to emphasize content that is not specific to a single medium or class of media. Rather, the content emphasizes topics or issues that range across all media. It should be noted that many of these questions contained the concept "press" rather than a specific medium. Traditionally, one might interpret "press" as meaning newspapers or other print media, but such an interpretation is not a safe assumption today.

In those questions that did make a reference to a specific medium, newspapers and television were the most frequently mentioned media. Newspapers and television were each mentioned in slightly over 11% of the questions analyzed. The next most frequently mentioned sub-category was not a specific medium, but a class of media--"broadcast media". The general reference to "broadcast media" showed up in 6.1% of the questions analyzed. Radio was the next most frequently mentioned specific medium with 4.3% of the questions making reference to radio.

The sub-category of other media mentioned needs some attention since 5% of the questions made reference to media other than the ones constituting specific sub-categories. A weakness of this study is that no attempt was made to record what other media were mentioned or the frequency with which these media were mentioned. However, it would seem that some course content and exam content is devoted to media that may not normally be considered mass media.

TABLE 3

Analysis of Question Content by Reference to Media

<u>Sub-Category</u>	<u>No. of Questions*</u>	<u>% of Total**</u>
Person Connected with Media	160	5.1%
Newspapers	355	11.2
Magazines	33	2.9
Books	33	1.0
"Printed Media"	70	2.2
Television	350	11.1
Radio	136	4.3
Cable Systems	28	.9
"Broadcast Media"	191	6.1
Film	92	2.9
Recordings	18	.6
Other Media Mentioned	158	5.0
No Media Mentioned	1242	39.4
Insufficient Information to Categorize	230	7.3

* Number of questions may not add to 3134 because of the inclusion of multiple parts of questions.

** Percentage may not add to 100 because of rounding.

Books, cable systems and recordings are specific media referred to in only 1% or less of the questions analyzed. This seems to indicate that these mass media receive little emphasis on exams given in the course. While this does not permit us to say that these media are not important course content, we can say that even when these media may be given some emphasis as course content, questions about them do not frequently appear on exams.

It is interesting to note that when the media class and the specific media in that class were examined as a group, the broadcast media were referred to more frequently than were the print media. As a group, newspapers, magazines, books and the class of "printed media" were specifically referred to in 17.3% of the questions. Television, radio, cable systems and the class of "broadcast media" were specifically referred to in 22.4% of the questions. This would seem to support Gerald Stone's finding that teachers may tend to emphasize television,¹⁰ although we would modify this to say broadcast media in general.

Finally, when the data here were compared with the data from the syllabi content analysis by Shaw and Cole, we find similarities in content emphasized, especially among those media receiving the most emphasis. As Table 4 shows, the relative rank of media specifically mentioned or covered in exam questions and on course syllabi is the same. While the percentages are higher for media specifically covered on a course syllabi, this higher percentage may be explained by the

10. Stone, op. cit.

fewer number of categories used in the syllabi content analysis and the inclusion of a category of no media mentioned in the analysis here. Had we been forced to infer a specific medium for those questions where no medium was mentioned, the percentages for each media sub-category used in this analysis may have been higher.

TABLE 4

Percentage Comparison of Media Mentioned
in Exam Questions and on Course Syllabi

<u>Sub-Category</u>	<u>Exam</u>	<u>Syllabi*</u>
Newspapers	11.2%	39%
Television	11.1	33
"Broadcast Media"	6.1	28
Radio	4.3	26
No Media Mentioned	39.4	--

* Shaw and Cole, op. cit., Table 3.

It should be noted that magazines and film also had rather strong percentages in the syllabi content analysis, 28% and 26% respectively. But, the percentages in the analysis of exam questions was relatively low, magazines with 2.9% and film with 2.9%. Again, the low percentages here may be the result of a larger number of sub-categories used, or it may suggest that these media are covered in the course content, but are not frequent exam questions.

Topic Reference

Analysis of exam questions with respect to mentioning a specific topic shows that the majority of questions (60.6%) fall into six sub-categories: other topics, history of the press, communication models, press law, advertising and press operations, in that order. As would perhaps be expected, the percentages in Table 5 show that no one topic sub-category dominates with respect to content emphasis on exams.

The sub-category with the highest percentage of specific references on the exams analyzed was the sub-category of other topics(22.1%). Even though this sub-category is mentioned in less than one fourth of the exams, it does suggest that exam questions in the mass communication and society course cover content that goes beyond what might be called the "traditional" topics. A weakness in the analysis is that we did not attempt to record the specific "other" topics or count the frequency with which these topics were mentioned. Our guess is that recording the "other" topics would have fragmented this sub-category into many smaller topical areas with much lower percentages of occurrence.

In questions that made reference to topics for which we had specific sub-categories, history of the press was the topic most frequently mentioned--11.4% of the questions analyzed. This would seem to suggest, as Shaw and Cole noted, ¹¹ that the history of the press is a topic of some importance in the mass communication and society course. This is somewhat curious since most journalism programs offer a course in the history of the press. However, the inclusion of history in the mass communication and society course may simply reflect the fact that it is difficult to establish a foundation for current media functions and

11. Shaw and Cole, op. cit., p. 13.

practices without getting into the historical evolution of the media. It would have been interesting to have compared the findings here with how instructors rated objective statements with history of the press content.

Communication models (8.4%) and press law (8.1%) were two other topics receiving some emphasis as content for exam questions. These topics were followed by advertising (5.8%) and press operations (5.1%). All the remaining topics showed up as exam content in only 4% or less of the exam questions.

When the findings with respect to topic reference were compared to the findings of the two previous studies, some interesting consistencies emerge. But, there are also some differences which lead us to suggest that what instructors put on the syllabi and rate as priority content is not necessarily what they emphasize in exam questions.

Table 6 compares the percentage of topic references for exam questions and syllabi content. These data suggest some interesting contrasts which are worth noting. For example, the topics of press ethics and future of the press were specifically mentioned on 29% and 26%, respectively, of the syllabi analyzed. Yet, neither press ethics (.6%) nor future of the press (.8%) have relatively strong frequencies of occurrence in exam questions. Similar contrasts can be observed for the topics of press and popular culture, press councils, role of feedback, etc. What this suggests is that these topics are covered in the course, but they are not topics frequently used in exam questions.

On the other hand, the topics of communication models and press operations show opposite tendencies. The percentage of syllabi referring

TABLE 5

Analysis of Question Content by Reference to Topic Covered

<u>Sub-Category</u>	<u>No. of Questions*</u>	<u>% of Total**</u>
Press-Government Relations	119	3.8%
Audience Analysis	126	4.0
Advertising	180	5.8
4-Theories of Press	69	2.2
Press Regulation	121	3.9
Press Criticism	83	2.7
Press Ethics	18	.6
Press Law	253	8.1
Economics of Press	124	4.0
Future of Press	25	.8
History of Press	356	11.4
Press "in general"	35	1.1
Press & Popular Culture	9	.3
Press as Gatekeeper	38	1.2
Public Relations	73	2.3
Role of Feedback	16	.5
Press & Pressure Groups	24	.8
Entertainment Role	23	.7
International Comm.	21	.7
Press Councils	16	.5
Education in Journalism	5	.2
Persuasion	46	1.5
(Continued)		

TABLE 5 (Con'd)

Analysis of Question Content by Reference to Topic Covered

<u>Sub-Category</u>	<u>No. of Questions*</u>	<u>% of Total**</u>
Communication Models	262	8.4%
Wire Services	108	3.5
Press Operations	158	5.1
Words-Symbols	35	1.1
Other Topics	690	22.1
Insufficient Information to Categorize	91	2.9

* Number of questions may not add to 3134 because of the inclusion of multiple parts of questions.

** Percentage may not add to 100 because of rounding.

TABLE 6

Percentage Comparison of Topics Mentioned
in Exam Questions and on Course Syllabi

<u>Sub-Category</u>	<u>Exam</u>	<u>Syllabi*</u>
Press-Government Relations	3.8%	56%
Audience Analysis	4.0	42
Advertising	5.8	36
4-Theories of Press	2.2	34
Press Regulations	3.9	34
Press Criticism	2.7	31
Press Ethics	.6	29
Press Law	8.1	29
Economics of Press	4.0	29
Future of Press	.8	26
History of Press	11.4	24
Press "in general"	1.1	21
Press & Popular Culture	.3	18
Press as Gatekeeper	1.2	18
Public Relations	2.3	18
Role of Feedback	.5	17
Press & Pressure Groups	.8	14
Entertainment Role	.7	14
International Comm.	.7	12
Press Councils	.5	12
Education in Journalism	.2	12
Persuasion	1.5	12

(Continued)

TABLE 6 (Con'd)

Percentage Comparison of Topics Mentioned
in Exam Questions and on Course Syllabi

<u>Sub-Category</u>	<u>Exam</u>	<u>Syllabi*</u>
Communication Models	8.4%	7%
Wire Services	3.5	7
Press Operations	5.1	3
Words-Symbols	1.1	3
Other Topics	22.1	-
Insufficient Information to Categorize	2.9	-

* Shaw and Cole, op. cit., Table 5.

specifically to these topics was rather low, 7% and 3% respectively. However, both communication models (8.4%) and press operations (5.1%) show relatively frequent occurrence in exam questions. This suggests that these topics are not specifically covered in the course content, but do show up with some frequency on exams, perhaps in connection with some other topic or topics.

Topics such as advertising, press law and history of the press show relatively consistent specific references on both course syllabi and exams. This would seem to indicate a comfortableness with the more "traditional" topics in the course and on exams.

With respect to how instructors rate content priority, as measured in Stone's study, the findings give support to some topics that instructors rated as high priority. For example, First Amendment guarantees is supported by the topic of press law which showed up in 8.1% of the exam questions. And, mass communication theory topics seem to be relatively frequent topics in exam questions. However, the topics of media economics, the media consumer, and basics about mass media and their characteristics do not show up frequently in exam questions. Again, this suggests that the topics may be covered in the course, but not emphasized in questions on exams given in the course.

Summary

The content analysis of mass communication and society course exams revealed these general findings.

(1) Questions on exams do not seem to reflect any tendency to emphasize a geographical area. Only a slight tendency to slant content toward the national (U.S.) level was observed.

(2) The majority of questions mentioning a specific medium fall into four sub-categories: no media mentioned, newspapers, television, and "broadcast media".

(3) The class of "broadcast media" was emphasized more than the class of "print media" in exam questions.

(4) The relative rank of media specifically mentioned in exam questions was the same as the rank of media specifically mentioned on course syllabi.

(5) The majority of exams mentioning a specific topic fall into six sub-categories: other topics, history of the press, communication models, press law, advertising, and press operations.

(6) The topics instructors put on course syllabi and rate as priority topics were not necessarily the same topics emphasized on exams.

(7) There is an indication of comfortableness with the more "traditional" topics as course content and on exams.

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Rawson, Janice C., "Objectives of Instruction about Mass Communications Suitable for the Average Media Consumer at the Post-High School Level," masters thesis, 1973.

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